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Tracing Intergenerational Narratives of Ecological, Cultural, and Sexual Violence in the U.S./  
Mexico Borderland

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## Abstract

In an oft quoted line from the seminal text, *Borderlands/La Frontera=The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa states, “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.” Anzaldúa’s metaphor of a throbbing, breathing wound evokes the grotesque violence of a region where abuse is commonplace. In 1848 the Rio Grande River/Río Bravo del Norte became the border that separated two dominant nations and cultures, and the region became a chaotic place of ecological, sexual, racial, and national violence. These forces tear at each other now. As they do, they tear at the environment in the process, resulting in crises of rampant exploitation, sexual violence, and irreparable degradation. Since 1993, there have been 370 women and young girls who have been brutally murdered in what has become known as the *Feminicidios en Ciudad Juárez*. I argue that literature provides a narrative solution to the phenomenon of femicides in the borderland. The texts highlighted in this project offer a mix of imaginative storytelling, subaltern voice, research, and testimony in a medium that can transcend the region and hopefully inspire opposition to the issues that infect the borderland and beyond. Their narratives implicate generations of local, regional, national and international actors in what I, and they, perceive as a confluence of environmental degradation and sexual violence.

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## 1. Introduction

In an oft quoted line from the seminal text, *Borderlands/La Frontera=The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa states, “The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.”<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa’s metaphor of a throbbing, breathing wound evokes the grotesque violence of a region where abuse is commonplace. In 1848 the Rio Grande River/Río Bravo del Norte became the border that separated two dominant nations and cultures, and the region became a chaotic place of ecological, sexual, racial, and national violence.<sup>2</sup> These forces tear at each other now. As they do, they tear at the environment in the process, resulting in crises of rampant exploitation, sexual violence, and irreparable degradation.

In this project I explore the confluence of gender violence and environmental degradation at the U.S./Mexico borderland, particularly the Rio Grande River Valley region, which is home to the border towns of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, USA. Since 1993, there have been 370 women and young girls who have been brutally murdered in what has become known as the *Feminicidios en Ciudad Juárez*. In fact, law enforcement officials and humanitarian organizations estimate hundreds of unreported femicides in the region. There is no consensus on the number of femicides, leaving only a harrowing number of innocent women and

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2012). 25.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that there are number of indigenous communities that have inhabited the borderland region far before it was a border and far before Spanish-Mexican and American forces invaded the area.

girls. The reality is simple. There are far too many victims for this to be anything other than a pervasive epidemic.

While awareness of the Ciudad Juárez femicides has expanded internationally over the course of the last decade, this project will explore the phenomenon as a site of environmental writer-activism. The region is home to a rich tradition of writers who tell stories about Chicanas/os living in the open wound of the border. Through their writing, we can see a pattern of systematic devaluation of both the borderland and the Chicano/a and Mexican communities. Priscilla Solis Ybarra and Rob Nixon provide the theoretical framework with which to read some Chicano/a literature as examples of social and environmental justice. Ybarra and Nixon argue that mainstream audiences should read these stories, because they offer important critical counter-narratives to American and Mexican history and culture.

In this project I also explore victimized, impoverished and silenced communities that generate “testimonio” writing that disrupts hegemonic narratives predicated on ignorance to the pernicious issues of the borderland. For a proper consideration of testimonial writing that often engenders Chicana/o literature, I rely upon the critical discussions from John Beverley’s *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, Jefferey Alexander et al.’s *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, and Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith’s *Human Rights and Narrative Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, which, like Ybarra and Nixon, articulate the literary reasons for reading Chicana/o

literature.<sup>3 4 5</sup> I, like others, argue that seeking social and environmental justice through literature should compel critics to seek out violence that is beyond our immediate purview and resolve the confluence of issues in the borderland. This project is my plea for critics to listen and respond to the voices that are left out of the conversation, the subaltern, because they are most at risk now and in the future. It is with this reason that Ybarra and Nixon's work will offer the critical framework to examine the testimonial functions of writing. What we cannot do is continue to ignore and erase the harsh, traumatic realities of sexual violence and environmental degradation at the border. The texts examined in this project stand on their own, bringing literary awareness to environmental crises that precipitate violence. The authors, the texts, and the voices that populate this project deliver the imperative message that *we* must conceive of ways to resolve environmental issues while *we* reconsider systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and ableism.

Governments, agencies, scientists, scholars, and community activists have studied the pervasive pollution and environmental degradation that has irreparably harmed the U.S./Mexico Borderland, specifically the border that divides the Rio Grande River Valley. Despite the resources committed to studying decades of unsustainable and disastrous actions made by powerful government institutions and massive multinational corporations, widespread public awareness and opposition to the historical, cultural, racial, and political landscape that has

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<sup>3</sup> John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrative Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Jefferey Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (University of California Press, 2004).



wrought such damages is seemingly nonexistent. Likewise, numerous other qualified individuals and organizations have studied and profiled the gender crisis that has consumed the borderland for more than two decades. The terrible phenomenon of hundreds, if not thousands, of women who have been brutally assaulted, tortured and murdered. Similar to local environmental activists, interest groups concerned with the femicides in the borderland have seen limited success in raising awareness, let alone protecting women and families or apprehending those responsible.

Therefore, when we look at the borderland, we should see crises disproportionately affecting disenfranchised and vulnerable populations who are suffering from problems brought on by local, national and global actions. There has been limited scholarship tracing the intersection of environmental degradation and sexual violence in the borderland, but there have been talented writers within the Chicano/a community that have historically populated the region. I argue that literature provides a solution to what I perceive as a narrative issue. The texts highlighted in this project offer a mix of imaginative storytelling, subaltern voice, research, and testimony in a medium that can transcend the region and hopefully inspire opposition to the issues that infect the borderland and beyond. Their narratives implicate generations of local, regional, national and international actors in what I, and they, perceive as a confluence of environmental degradation and sexual violence.

In this project I explore three canonical Chicana writers, Jovita González, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Ana Castillo, as activists who have laid the groundwork to perceive the environmental, racial, national, and sexual conundrum that is the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso borderland. I use an interdisciplinary approach to conceive of slow violence that uniquely affects

the Chicano/a community at or around the borderland. It is chiefly through their perspectives that we can properly consider the ecocritical value of reading an eclectic mix of Chicana voices aiming to destabilize and deconstruct violence as it relates to anthropocentric and phallogentric conceptions of nature. I will begin with Jovita González and Eve Raleigh's *Caballero: A Historical Novel*, which profiles and dismantles the waning Spanish-Mexican patriarchy imposed on the land.<sup>6</sup> Critics debate whether to include this text in the Chicana literary canon, but it ultimately offers an early impression of national, racial, and gender identities that continually and perversely reopen the wound of the borderland.<sup>7</sup> Empirically, however, exploitation has spiraled out of control since the border became a contested site, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* dramatizes a multifaceted pattern of violence that has persisted due to ecological degradation and cultural and bodily devaluation.<sup>8</sup> Like González and Raleigh, Gaspar de Alba's text is invested in the intergenerational narrative of violence, and characters in the novel reconsider the borderland as queer space to destabilize modern Chicano identity and modern American phallogentrism. Finally, I conclude the literary section with Ana Castillo's *The Guardians*, which situates its primary narrative within the same border environment. Castillo's adept ability to interweave voices cohesively exemplifies an intergenerational mix of voices who

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<sup>6</sup> Jovita González and Eve Raleigh, *Caballero: A Historical Novel*, Ed. José Eduardo. Limón and María Eugenia Cotera, (College Station: Texas A&M UP, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Critics point to the inauthentic dual narrative, which ultimately did not represent the canonical Chicano/a voice. Most notably, it is difficult to know Gonzalez's pure intentions as writer, whatever those may have been. Likewise, we cannot know Gonzalez's authorial intent as the writing and publication of this book confronted shades of disenfranchisement.

<sup>8</sup> Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, (Houston, TX: Arte Publico, 2005).

bear witness to real and threatened sexual violence at the border.<sup>9</sup> *The Guardians* contains four perspectives across three distinct generations of Chicanos and Chicanas living at or on both sides of the border, and it examines the culturally perilous border region while scrutinizing the toxic environment that is so often ignored. Connecting these texts will trace an intergenerational narrative of politically-oriented fiction concerned with "violence" that has eroded the region. Such a narrative is essential to compel communities, journalists, critics, artists, writers, politicians, etc. to resolve the toxic violence that envelopes the U.S./Mexico borderland.

## **2. A History of Sexual and Environmental Violence in the US./Mexico Borderland**

The U.S./Mexico border extends from Tijuana, Baja California, and Imperial Beach, California, in the west to Matamoros, Tamaulipas, and Brownsville, Texas, in the east. From the U.S. perspective the border is politically and militarily considered to be a dangerous zone requiring a coordinated defense effort, but the fact of the matter is that this region is violent regardless of human action. Some of the border is protected by American walls erected to deter illegal immigration from Mexico, but the borderland acts as its own barrier in that large swaths of the land is desolate desert where countless men, women, and children, of all nationalities, have perished attempting to cross from either side. The borderland is inherently one of the most perilous border regions in the world. The total length of the continental border is 1,954 miles, which delineates the U.S. states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas and the Mexican states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. Texas and Chihuahua share the longest section of the border. The proximity of sprawling urban environments, namely El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, has become an epicenter of

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<sup>9</sup> Ana Castillo, *The Guardians*, (New York: Random House, 2008).

borderland society, culture and politics. I focus on this region, the twin cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, because many residents suffer from a particular blend of environmental and sexual violence.

Amnesty International, in response to pressure to investigate a pattern of sexual violence and human rights abuses, analyzed data from the region. Beginning in 1993 and continuing to the present, approximately 370 women and young girls have been murdered in and around the industrial border town of Ciudad Juárez. A conference convened on femicide in 2008, a joint effort by PATH, the Inter-American Alliance for the Prevention of Gender-based Violence (InterCambios), the Medical Research Council of South Africa (MRC), and the World Health Organization (WHO), investigated several regions with a pattern of murder targeting women. Julia E. Monárrez Fragoso submitted an article to the conference, “Strengthening Understanding of Femicide: Using Research to Galvanize Action and Accountability,” in which she identified that between the years 1993-2007 a total of 494 girls and women had been killed in Ciudad Juárez.<sup>10</sup> The reported numbers, however, perhaps belie the reality. There is not much consensus on the total number female victims. Authorities have encountered challenges accruing enough information and evidence to categorize thousands of murders of women in the region as acts of gender violence, even if several of the signs exist. In either case, the number of women falling victim to grotesque brutality and violence because they are women represents a phenomenon worthy of the world’s attention.

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<sup>10</sup> Julia E. Monárrez Fragoso, “An Analysis of Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: 1993–2007,” (PATH: Washington DC, 2006) 79.

The Amnesty International report correlates the criminal, drug trafficking, socioeconomic, environmental, gender, and sexual factors that classify a murder as a femicide. For the most part, the crimes of sexual violence and murder predominantly victimize attractive young women and adolescents, many of whom worked in the maquiladoras or in other poorly compensated jobs. It should also be noted that many of the victims were sex workers. Most of the victims are impoverished, and they are made vulnerable by a criminal orchestration of labor rights and human rights abuses by maquiladora managers and owners. In addition, they experience disenfranchisement from the legal system in Mexico.<sup>11</sup> In both the PATH and Amnesty International reports, it is noted that many of the women and girls are abducted while traveling away from and to home, in which the victims travel moderate distances across deserted land where the police and factory operators are either unmotivated or incapable of offering adequate protection and security.<sup>12</sup> Over time, however, more women are being abducted in populated, but destitute urban spaces, ravaged by pollution and economic instability. The shift from rural to urban space indicates the proliferation of gender violence in the region. Femicides in this area are classified according to a pattern of sexual abuse and tortured. Investigators concluded that many of the women are abducted through “deception or by force,” after which they are held captive, abused, raped, and torture until they are murdered.<sup>13</sup> Investigators reported the following common characteristics:

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<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International, “Intolerable Killings: 10 years of abductions and murders of women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua,” (Amnesty International: 2003) 63.

<sup>12</sup> Amnesty International 64.

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International 64.

Some of the victims have been shackled, beaten or tortured. Several of them have been mutilated; many were in an advanced state of decomposition; some were wearing clothes or were found with objects belonging to other women; and, in some cases, only the bones of victims who had disappeared years previously or, inexplicably, of girls who had spent years or months in the hands of their captors have been found. Some relatives also told the delegation they had heard that some bodies had been frozen for a period of time.<sup>14</sup>

Women have been found burned, poisoned, amputated, and decapitated; often times women are found with their hair removed, or breasts mutilated I focus on this region, the Rio Grande River Valley, because many residents suffer from a particular blend of environmental and sexual violence. The details that define these femicides are grotesque, suggesting a pattern of sadism against innocent women. In the early years of this phenomenon, mass grave sites were discovered containing dozens of bodies. There is no accurate way to determine whether all victims in a given grave site can be attributed to the same individual or group of individuals, but common sense might provide clarity in the fog. More recently, murderers have opted to dispose of bodies in public areas, sending chills of terror throughout the community. The Amnesty International report alleges that the bodies are disposed deliberately to retaliate against increased pressure from authorities and NGOs. The reality of the femicides in the borderland are almost beyond comprehension. Any solutions to this terrible phenomenon can only come through considerable study of the contributing issues.

While disturbingly bold, the local and federal agencies tasked with protecting and serving the community have routinely failed to address sexual violence and femicide. We see proof of

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<sup>14</sup> Amnesty International 65.

this in the boldness of the criminals. We see this in the fact that mass grave sites of dozens or more bodies can be discovered by a hapless passerby, but not by those tasked with patrolling and securing the community. We can see this when abusers, assaulters, and murders more defiantly committing crimes in populated, urban spaces. Seemingly, the criminal element in the region does not seem deterred. Amnesty International reports that due to the victim's relative poverty, and because they were women, law enforcement has often been met with "total indifference."<sup>15</sup> Their reports indicated that high-level officials in the state of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juárez routinely publicly blamed victims for their fate, "attributing it to their manner of dress, the place in which they worked, their conduct, the fact that they were walking alone, or parental neglect."<sup>16</sup> Local activism and international organizations have been responsible for fighting against deeply rooted sexist and misogynistic views of women that have stifled proper investigations and prosecutions of crimes against women, but to little effect. It is only after ten years that officials and authorities are approaching this phenomenon with the response necessary to resolve issues of sexual aggression and murder.

With so much pain and violence, it is difficult to fathom the motives of terror-inducing acts, acts that traumatize families and communities. It is debilitating when women finally possess a means of contributing to or sustaining a family, only to fall prey to a system of abuse in a region of violence and terror because of their gender. According to authorities, the murders in Ciudad Juárez have several different motives, such as crimes of passion, robbery, vengeance,

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<sup>15</sup> Amnesty International 65.

<sup>16</sup> Amnesty International 67.

drug trafficking, and domestic violence.<sup>17</sup> The truth is, there are many factors that cause gender-specific violence. Amnesty International cites “accelerated population growth,” in a region that is unable to respond with necessary public infrastructure and services. In the Ciudad Juárez region health, education, housing, sanitation, and lighting infrastructures and services are ill-equipped to handle the influx of people migrating to the area looking for adequate opportunity.<sup>18</sup>

Overpopulation has created serious conditions of poverty. Abject poverty and destitution leads to tensions within families and among the community, causing troubled individuals to perform harrowing acts of violence, specifically toward women who make up the majority of the workforce in several private sectors. To make matters worse, several corporations, or their subsidiaries, went bottom-up after the initial boom brought on by free trade, affecting millions. Due to unchecked globalization and unsustainable management, maquiladoras are closing due to environmental or human rights scandals. The promise of work was quickly dashed, creating an overpopulated region with few opportunities. It is the poorest and the weakest who suffer the most, and they deserve our attention and assistance the most as well. As history will show time and time again, whether here in Ciudad Juárez or elsewhere, the impoverished and disenfranchised bare the brunt of the problem.

The motives of assaulters and murderers are difficult to accurately profile, but enough facts can be correlated to illuminate the confluence of harmful and unsustainable actions.

Mercedes Olivera and Victoria J. Furio in their article, “Violencia Femicida: Violence against Women and Mexico's Structural Crisis,” aim to study the conditions that proliferate sexual

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<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International 65.

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International 66.



violence and murder against women. While they are careful to highlight the confluence of violence in Ciudad Juárez, sexual assault and murder of women can be traced as a proliferate pathology throughout Mexico, totaling more than 8000 femicides in 2005.<sup>19</sup> Central to their study of gender violence is the question, what cultural factors produce such toxic animosity and mistreatment toward women? Olivera and Furio conclude that violence against women is an “expression of male power,” which is rooted in internalized patriarchal culture and symbols.<sup>20</sup> Elements of Mexican culture subordinate women to men, which is unequal at best and tragic at worst. Olivera and Furio discuss a *machista* Mexican society that confers cultural expectations and limitations on women, which are expressed “in direct or hidden messages, discriminatory actions and excluding omissions, lack of resources, limits on freedom and coercion, objectification, exploitation, self-depreciation, feelings of guilt and shame, deception, and false justifications.”<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, Olivera and Furio contend that women are harmed in a society predicated on phallogentric ideals, and femicides are only one consequence. The culture that breeds violence against women is ingrained and evident in the cultural foundation of its citizens.

Anzaldúa conceives of the border as a violent place for women caught in between two exclusionary, male-dominated worlds. The borderland is a contested space where the poorest and the weakest become victimized. Katherine Pantaleo correlates two phenomena, the Norther American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) along with generations of patriarchal systems in both the U.S. and Mexico, as she profiles the femicides in Ciudad Juárez. In her article, “Gendered

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<sup>19</sup> Mercedes Olivera and Victoria J. Furio, “Violencia Femicida: Violence against Women and Mexico's Structural Crisis,” *Latin American Perspectives*, (JSTOR, 2006) 104.

<sup>20</sup> Olivera and Furio 104.

<sup>21</sup> Olivera and Furio 104.

Violence: An Analysis of the Maquiladora Murders,” Pantaleo argues that the trade agreement caused serious social harm, in particular to Mexican women.<sup>22</sup> NAFTA fundamentally changed the region, converting farm and ranching lands to build polluting factories. In the interest of free trade and maximum profit, liberalized labor fell by the wayside as workers’ ability to unionize diminished.<sup>23</sup> Pantaleo states, “under the view of patriarchy, two expressions are commonly used in Mexico to show the differences in states of males and females: these expressions are machismo and marianismo,” in which men are expected to display traits of bravado and aggression while women are expected to be domestic and inferior to men.<sup>24</sup> Pantaleo goes on to articulate *marianismo* as an integral expression of “self-sacrifice for family,” which was expanded as a direct result of NAFTA.<sup>25</sup> The neoliberal conceit of NAFTA, the promise guaranteed by free trade, was more jobs and opportunity. NAFTA made the border into a new land of opportunity. Pantaleo, however, criticizes NAFTA for its institutional predation on women. NAFTA ushered in a wave of manufacturing jobs built under the auspices of low costs and maximum profit, targeting women as suitable primary workforce. As a result, women, riding a wave of economic liberalization, flocked to maquiladoras for these jobs as a new way to sacrifice for the family, but this liberalization did not mix with the social and cultural conservatism of patriarchy. To add insult to injury, Mexican and American corporations made a practice of paying women low wages in addition to numerous instances of labor and human

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<sup>22</sup> Katherine Pantaleo, “Gendered Violence: An Analysis of the Maquiladora Murders,” *International Criminal Justice Review*, (Sage, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Pantaleo 350.

<sup>24</sup> Pantaleo 350.

<sup>25</sup> Pantaleo 351.

rights violations. All of these gendered forces combine to make the borderland an inherently dangerous place for women.

International organizations along with talented scholars and researchers have compiled a mountain of evidence that profiles and diagnoses the borderland's inherent gender violence. Their work collectively concludes that the social and economic conditions perpetuate sexual assault and murder against women, a phenomenon that has deep-seeded roots in the cultural foundation and social construction of gender. While much effort has been devoted to the phenomenon, little if any has attempted to acknowledge sexual violence and murder as an environmental issue. Basilio Verduzco Chavez explores the effect of NAFTA on the environment in the borderland in his dissertation, "Transnational Activism and Environmental Conflicts in the United States-Mexico Border Region."<sup>26</sup> Verduzco Chavez correlates pollution and other signs environmental degradation to overpopulation. He notes the Ciudad Juárez saw one of the largest influxes of population density, partly because the borderland region shared with El Paso represents a major juncture of profitable, arable land. All of that land made fertile by centuries of seasonal water flow from the Rio Grande River was sectioned off by multinational corporations to construct massive maquiladoras.<sup>27</sup> Industrialization enticed millions to move to the borderland on both sides. As noted by others, concentrations of population growth stressed existing infrastructure, upending quality drinking water and waste water treatment. With the main source of water the river that forms the boundary of the two countries, urbanization has rapidly drained and polluted the water. In fact, clean water treatment has become a more laborious task given the

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<sup>26</sup> Basilio Verduzco Chavez, "Transnational Activism and Environmental Conflicts in the United States-Mexico Border Region" (UMI: New Brunswick, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Verduzco Chavez 30.

amount of pollutants dumped in the river upstream, particularly by U.S. cities.<sup>28 29</sup> Air quality is also an issue for the twin cities, as they failed to meet acceptable air pollution standards set by the EPA.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the number of days in which the ozone levels rose above EPA standards increased by 17% in three years after NAFTA's official introduction, and the number of days has been steadily rising since.<sup>31</sup> The research conducted by Amnesty International, Olivera and Furio, and Verduzco Chavez presents strong empirical evidence to link rapid population growth to all sorts of pollution, degradation, and violence in the region.

Decades of concentrated pollution have irreparably harmed the environment, and scientific studies have only recently begun to comprehend the short and long term effects degradation. Pantaleo argues that industrialization as a result of NAFTA contributed to rampant gender violence, and others target the policy as the start to environmental violence. Verduzco Chavez notes that growth of settlement near industrial facilities has increased, which are notorious for polluting any surrounding ecosystem. Verduzco Chavez' research connects NAFTA to the "constant threats of illegal toxic waste dumps, runoff or spills, large chimneys spring toxic gases that drastically harm the air quality," all of which is associated with a long list of pervasive, chronic and lethal health concerns.<sup>32</sup> Verduzco Chavez estimates that "only 70% of the

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<sup>28</sup> Verduzco Chavez 60.

<sup>29</sup> As clean water becomes a scarce commodity, water rights becomes an area of contention between the two countries; due to increased population density in cities along the Rio Grande River, in addition to wasteful and unsustainable agricultural water use, the desert region is currently enduring a multi-year draught. Water rights will only continue to be an issue.

<sup>30</sup> Verduzco Chavez 56.

<sup>31</sup> Verduzco Chavez 64.

<sup>32</sup> Verduzco Chavez 60.

352 maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez disposed of hazardous materials properly,” meaning roughly 44 tons of liquid and solid waste is thought to be illegally dumped daily.<sup>33</sup> The saddest fact is that this border region is not the only location in America where we can see rampant disregard of the environmental laws meant to protect the ecosystem. What is unique, however, is the concentration of businesses and factories that are the primary causes of environmental degradation. Eugenia Shekhter investigated heavy metal pollution as a result of facilities created by NAFTA.<sup>34</sup> Shekhter in particular studied the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO) Facility, a 120-year-old copper and lead smelter facility operated by an American corporation with similar facilities throughout the United States. While the ASARCO facility has been decommissioned since 1999 in response to mounting pressure from environmental protection groups, Shekhter finds that the “facility has been a major source of heavy metal pollution in some parts of the Paso del Norte region for decades,” going further to suggest, “ASARCO emissions may have disrupted the natural cycling of elements in the surrounding environment and possibly over a much greater distance.”<sup>35</sup> Shekhter concludes that residents were “potentially exposed to heavy metals present in air, indoor dusts as well as in outdoor dust and soil. Additionally, they may have been exposed to the harmful materials in attic dusts during house renovation or remodeling (active exposure) or due to defective construction of houses (passive exposure).”<sup>36</sup> Heavy metals are just some of the pollutants that have pervaded the

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<sup>33</sup> Verduzco Chavez 60.

<sup>34</sup> Eugenia Shekhter, “2,” (UMI: El Paso, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Shekhter 165.

<sup>36</sup> Shekhter 154.

ecosystem and community for decades. Developing residences near industrial facilities are an environmental hazard at best and an irreparable disaster at worst. Both Verduzco Chavez and Shekhter find that these polluting facilities are surrounded by the poorer communities of individuals; these are residential areas that are barely affordable with the low wages paid to the employees of the multinational corporations.

What is clear from history is a narrative of inconsideration and devaluation of both land and people by powerful people, corporations and institutions. It is important to remember, a polluted community is one thing, but working *and living* in such an environment further impacts thousands of individuals, most of which are women. And so, the confluence of two issues become evident. On the one hand, there is a long list of evidence to support that multinational corporations and their facilities have disastrously impacted the environment and disproportionately affected the poorest people. Many, many other researchers and scholars have studied the phenomenon of femicides in the region, ultimately deducing that the disproportionate number of women affected belong to poor socioeconomic classes. It is clear that while we can comprehend femicides in terms of the socioeconomic, gender, and cultural landscape of the region, we should also consider the *actual* landscape. Given the preponderance of scientific data, one of the most difficult challenges is representing information in such a way as to inspire activism. A refrain in Fragoso, Olivera and Furio, Pantaleo, Verduzco Chavez and Shekhter's research and scholarship is the fact that while there is enough evidence to generate a justifiable amount of activism on behalf of victims and women, or of the environment, it is difficult for the numbers to translate into stories that extend beyond the region and into international consciousness. Moreover, all of these scholars conclude that the data warrants international

pressure. So, how do we make these reports known to the wider public? How does one inspire solutions on the matters that concern Americans, Mexicans, indigenous populations, Chicanas and Chicanos, the communities that call the region home and are disproportionately affected?

### **3. Conceiving of the Borderland as a Site of Environmental and Social Justice Literature**

Tracing a Chicano/a intergenerational narrative with which to conceive of pervading ecological degradation is best accomplished through Rob Nixon's cogent book, *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).<sup>37</sup> Nixon explores humanity's perceptual inabilities and biases that are motivated by a lack of information or a cacophony of distractions. Nixon aims to refocus the conversation of environmentalism to the spaces where class, race, ethnicity, culture, gender and nature intersect, because they are the locations of the most urgent threats upon environmental and social justice. Nixon's work describes "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all," because "violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility."<sup>38</sup> He argues that we should not forget to ask whether our perceptual view is too narrow or ignorant to the matters that affect the subaltern. In an effort to seek environmental and social justice, Nixon's work means to counter desensitization toward the forms of pollution, erosion, and degradation that predominantly affect marginalized and disenfranchised communities. The fact of the matter is simple: the crises that

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<sup>37</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Nixon 2.

affect such groups are not exciting enough to capture the headlines or attention of mainstream American audiences.

If we expand the definition of violence, looking for instances that occur more slowly and perhaps silently, then we will begin to comprehend the more pervasive effects of human activity that threaten social justice. Specifically, we need to redefine violence. As Nixon states, “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, has calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps what is most pervasive are the ways that environmental issues slowly wreak havoc to communities over generations. Furthermore, Nixon’s analysis of “slow violence” indicates that environmental degradation disproportionately affects underrepresented and marginalized individuals, groups, or communities. Which is to say, some of the worst examples of utter disregard of any sort of land ethic are often located in places where people are equally disregarded. Nixon intersects environmentalism with social justice, suggesting that racism, classism, and sexism are often conflated with environmental degradation. Environmentalism, therefore, has a social responsibility to confront the complex issues that plague the entire ecosystem, especially including humans without a voice.

For Nixon, the problem at the center of slow violence is inaccurate representation. It is difficult enough to represent environmental issues to wide audiences or to the degree necessary for appropriate responses. Moreover, it is obviously difficult for some to conceive of systematized racism, sexism, and disenfranchisement that historically damages communities. Representing the near-imperceptible slow violence, especially in regards to silenced

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<sup>39</sup> Nixon 2.



communities, is audacious for any person or group. Nixon's book is meant to demonstrate the types of people that are perhaps best suited to bring attention to the issues that plague a given community faced with degradation, pollution, erosion, etc. In reference to literary critics, such as us, Nixon argues that we need "to engage the representational, narrative, and the strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence."<sup>40</sup> Nixon further argues that communities disproportionately affected by environmental slow violence often produce writer-activists who construct "intergenerational narratives." Assuming that the general public, critics and artists engage in a conversation that extends across a variety of mediums, these cultural products can serve an imperative rhetorical and political purpose concerning a holistic assessment of nature and culture. He specifically states that "imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, [make] it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses."<sup>41</sup> In other words, community writer-activists can conceive and imaginatively retell or testify to what seems opaque from the outside; their testimony has the unique ability to empower the community from within or to implicate ignorant outside communities. One of Nixon's intentions in his book is to refocus attention on sites where writers and social movements are embroiled in a complicated landscape characterized by disenfranchisement and environmental slow violence. This paper means to add to that collection, and several others are achieving the same end.

Nixon's theoretical framework and political conviction is paralleled by ecocritical and Chicano/a studies professors Devon Peña and Priscilla Solis Ybarra. Peña, in his essay

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<sup>40</sup> Nixon 2.

<sup>41</sup> Nixon 15.

“Environmental Justice and the Future of Chicano/a Studies, profiles the ways that Chicanos/as “seek to transform the system, to secure autonomy and self-reliance within...local spaces and places, and to find strategies to uncouple...communities from the capitalist machine whose purpose is the relentless servicing of consumer desire.”<sup>42</sup> Conditioned by a history of misrepresentation and ignorance, Chicanos/as often turn inward to resolve the issues that seem to be invisible to everyone else. Here, Peña argues that Chicanos/as articulate a dialectical opposition in their cultural productions, a conversation that does not simply look to record and translate lived cultural experiences but one that aims to address problematic patterns of violence when nobody else is listening. Priscilla Solis Ybarra, an associate professor at the University of Northern Texas and who specializes in the intersections of Mexican American literature and ecocriticism, published “Borderlands as Bioregion: Jovita González, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the Twentieth-Century Ecological Revolution in the Rio Grande Valley,” which traces examples of oppositional environmental narratives in Chicana literature. Ybarra studies the ecological politics in Mexican American writing, and captures the depth of Anzaldúa’s open-wound metaphor cited above, claiming that “the most pressing problem of the twenty-first century may be that racism, homophobia, and sexism continue along side—and are exacerbated by the shrinking sustainability of the natural environment.”<sup>43</sup> Ybarra’s argument echoes Rob Nixon’s conception of slow violence, which locates places of ecological damage causing further harm to surrounding

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<sup>42</sup> Devon Peña, “Environmental Justice and the Future of Chicano/a Studies,” (*Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 35.2, 2010). 149-57.

<sup>43</sup> Priscilla Solis Ybarra, “Borderlands as Bioregion: Jovita González, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the Twentieth-Century Ecological Revolution in the Rio Grande Valley.”(*MELUS*, 34.2, 2009). 176.

marginalized communities.<sup>44</sup> As Ybarra writes, these issues will be exacerbated without holistically considering the deep-rooted slow violence of the borderland—we can see this already and these problems will continue to erupt.<sup>45</sup> Motivated by Peña and Ybarra, and given that culture and nature are inextricably linked in the United States and most acutely in contested border regions, I believe that we have a humanitarian imperative to uphold principles of environmental justice when seeking resolutions for the sexual, racial, and ecological violence that has eroded regions such as the U.S./Mexico borderland. This border conflict—where gender, race, nationality and ecology conflate, and perhaps obfuscate at times—is saliently recorded in early and contemporary Chicana feminist prose and poetry; we must trace the dialectic of intergenerational narratives of Mexican Americans surviving and dying in this historically problematized region.

### *3.1 Cultural and Environmental Trauma Testimony in Chicana Literature*

The concept of writer-activism parallels the theoretical definitions used to describe testimonio. As this project turns its attention to Chicana literature as a site of writer-activism, it is urgent for critics to incorporate testimonial literary criticism that often engenders this literature.

John Beverley in, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, argues that “what is important about testimonio is that it produces, if not the real, then certainly a sensation of experience of the real

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<sup>44</sup> Once again, we should not ignore the complex tapestry of cultures in this region and recognize that there are countless indigenous communities that have been abused and disenfranchised by both dominant sides.

<sup>45</sup> Ybarra’s argument extends a line of critical thought begun by W. E. B. Du Bois and later appropriated by early ecocritic Lawrence Buell. Ybarra is working to fill a glaring lack of ecocritical interest in the Rio Grande River Valley when so many of its people have been suffering from the effects of living in a borderland marked by decades of cultural and ecological conflict.

that has determinate effects on the reader that are different from those produced by even the most realist or documentary fiction.”<sup>46</sup> Beverley, of course, is considering the testimonial functions commonly embodied in Latin American *testimonio* literature. Following the lead of Nixon, Ybarra, and Peña, it should be clear that the collection of Chicana literature used in this project embodies much of the same oppositional qualities of social and environmental justice testimony. Therefore, from a theoretical standpoint, this paper aims to interpret and merge the qualities of *testimonio* and writer-activism as a means to read texts that offer environmentally-conscious narratives that record the dynamic intersections of humans rights abuses, race, nationality, and culture in the borderland. Ybarra and Nixon profile several different examples of subaltern speech and writing that have expressed generational trauma of oppression and disenfranchisement while preserving an acute critical perspective of their surrounding environment.

In order to conceive of slow violence that is routinely discounted by dominant, audiences must engage with the issue of who counts as witness, because, as Nixon states, “contests over what counts as violence are intimately entangled with conflicts over who bear the social authority to witness, which entails much more than simply seeing and not seeing.”<sup>47</sup> The genre of *testimonio* is constructed around the debate of who counts as witness, and to what end new forms of testimony affect the conversation on the whole. Anna Sandoval, in *Toward a Latina Feminism of the America's*, suggests that Chicana writers must write against U.S. patriarchal hegemony, forcing Chicanas to “rewrite their history,” while also “[devising] new forms that allow them to

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<sup>46</sup> Beverley 40.

<sup>47</sup> Nixon 16.

speak in the voice that best relates their experience.”<sup>48</sup> Sandoval, and others, are observing, criticizing, and dismantling the Chicano cultural revolution and sociopolitical movement that ignored female voices. Despite serving in pivotal roles in the early formations of the cultural revolution and movement, nearly all Chicana writers have had to break through the barriers imposed by two patriarchal institutions. The Chicana writers discussed in this project are cognizant of the obstacles or limitations to their ability to speak and be understood. The writers examined in this project do not speak from a subaltern position. As I will demonstrate, each of these Chicana writers is writing from a relative disadvantage, but each occupies a different position of privilege and agency from which to narrativize lived or shared experiences. While testimonio traditionally aims to hear directly from the source in as unedited or unaltered as possible, the challenging question, of course, is who speaks for the dead?

The concept and occurrence of slow violence within the borderland (symbolic or physical) is cogently described by two seminal Chicana writer-activists: Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga. While neither are primarily known for their environmental rhetoric, both writers often infuse their work with environmental justice concerns, probably because it would be inaccurate and incomplete to do otherwise. Their prose and poetry is acutely interested in the situations of Chicanos/as, in which they spatially and ecologically contextualize the community. Anzaldúa’s poignant metaphor of the border as a wound continually torn apart by powerful forces deftly describes the inherent violence of the borderland. Such a powerful image begets even more powerful ideas as Cherrie Moraga correlates environmentalism with gender

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<sup>48</sup> Anna Marie Sandoval, *Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas: Repression and Resistance in Chicana and Mexicana Literature*, (U of Texas Press, 2008) 22.

subjugation and sexual violence. In Moraga's *The Last Generation*, specifically, she states, "*The earth is female*. Whether myth, metaphor, or memory, she is called 'Mother' by all peoples of all times. *Madre Tierra*. Like woman, Madre Tierra has been raped, exploited for her resources, rendered inert, passive, and speechless. Her cries manifested in earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions are not heeded."<sup>49</sup> For Moraga, the female body is much like the land, both being exploited and degraded in ways that are profoundly violent. Similar to Anzaldúa, Moraga indicts the Chicano/a community and broader patriarchal systems that ignore the ways that gender, sexuality and race inextricably intertwine with the environment. Jeffrey C. Alexander, published in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, argues, "For traumas to emerge at the level of collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises," and he goes further to qualify what he means by cultural trauma suggesting that "[it] is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity," which is precisely what Moraga and Anzaldúa articulate in their texts.<sup>50</sup> Anzaldúa and Moraga are patently dissatisfied with normative, hegemonic modes of thinking, and so they encourage Chicanos/as to rely on critical introspection as a means to resolve cultural trauma related to large-scale environmental issues. To that end, Moraga suggests, in *Loving in the War Years*, that articulating a dialectic of environmentalism and sexual violence requires Chicanos/as to consider the idea that "the [foundation] of our families is in the *earth beneath the floorboards of our homes*," and she goes on to say that "[Chicanos/as] must split wood, dig bare-fisted into the packed dirt to find out what [they] really have to hold in [their]

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<sup>49</sup> Cherrie Moraga, *The Last Generation*, (Boston, MA: South End, 1993). 172.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander et al. 40.

hands as ground.”<sup>51</sup> On the one hand, Moraga is asserting a symbolic act as means to consider the ways environmentalism and identity conflate, but the action is far more complex and in keeping with Peña’s political/cultural/social oppositionality. Therefore, seeking “to transform the system” and “secure autonomy and self-reliance,” while forming an intergenerational narrative is the action that, in part, tears at the cultural underpinnings of the Chicano/a community.

Anzaldúa and Moraga are venerated for their contributions to race, gender and queer theory specific to Latinas and Chicanas living and surviving in the U.S. In addition to this important critical work, their prose identifies the inherent intersections of the female body and nature. Their prose at times hints at a spiritual connection, but any surrealism is mitigated by the real and immediate threats explored in their texts. In keeping with Alexander, Moraga and Anzaldúa testify to individual and collective traumas, profiling a set of pervasive events, behaviors, and traditions that have harmed women in Mexican-American communities and families. As Anzaldúa and Moraga oppose gender and sexual violence that coexists with environmental degradation, they speak for Chicanas who are silenced by generations of two patriarchal systems intersecting in the borderland; their act of digging into the social and cultural floor boards means to expand responsibility for social and environmental justice reform to local, national, and international groups. Likewise, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith in their book, *Human Rights and Narrative Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, suggest that the act of self-decolonization extends into the public sphere, meaning that “all stories invite an ethical response from listeners and readers. All have strong affective dimensions for both the tellers and their

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<sup>51</sup> Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó Por Sus Labios*, (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2000). 45.

audience, effects that can be challenged in negative and positive ways.”<sup>52</sup> Moraga’s symbolic act of digging in order to discover the cultural and social foundations that cause issues for Chicanas is an act that decolonizes individual and collective minds. Her position as a writer-activist invites outsiders *to witness* her life and listen to the stories that she spins as evidence of collective trauma. On an environmental scale, as Nixon saliently discusses in terms of slow violence, it is impossible to be ignorant to the cultural, social, and political dynamics of a large ecosystems. Schaffer and Smith contend that testimony is necessary to assert agency, individually or collectively, suggesting that “for rights discourse to become activated victims need to come forward and testify to their experience. Their testimony brings into play, implicitly or explicitly, a rights claim.”<sup>53</sup> Their prose is imbued with elements of the personal and the collective. It would be a mistake to let these writer-activist’s prose, concerning social and environmental justice, fade away. Ultimately, the critical frameworks of writer-activism and *testimonio* provide the urgent critical vantage point from which to read and respond to stories and voices emanating from the borderland, especially those who have perished.

#### **4. Tracing “Slow Violence” in the Borderland Through Imaginative Writer-Activism**

##### *4.1. Digging into the Dirt: The Destabilization of Spanish-Mexican and American Patriarchy in the Formation of the Borderland*

Jovita González and Eve Raleigh’s *Caballero: A Historical Novel* is controversially situated as an early Chicana literary text, but it is one of the first depictions of a Latina or Chicana perspective in literature. The novel, though written in the 1930s, was found and

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<sup>52</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrative Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> Schaffer and Smith 13.



published in the 1990s, inspiring much scholarship to categorize the text as early example of Chicana writing when few others existed. The duality of the narrative is certainly problematic, but it does not detract away from the ways that the text captures the social, cultural, political, and environmental drama of the Mexican-American War in 1848. Much of the novel narrates the struggles of Don Santiago, patriarch of the Mendoza y Soría family and his hacienda positioned between the Nueces and Rio Grande rivers. Don Santiago, as the story's primary protagonist, fervently fights to preserve his way of life, albeit a way of life predicated on male domination over land and women. With the U.S. government encroaching on what was until recently—within the historical setting of the novel—Mexican land for generations, Don Santiago sees the American presence as a direct and aggressive assault on his generational identity. González and Raleigh, however, balance the masculine narrative with an eclectic mix of female characters whose existence and protests destabilize the subjugation of women in Spanish-Mexican culture. In particular, the character of Susanita represents the rise of a new generation of women who seized opportunities made possible by the emerging borderland. Once again, Ybarra argues that the current environmental crises of the region will spiral into more exploitation and oppression if critics and audiences refuse to read Chicano/a literature as environmental and social justice texts. In “Borderlands as Bioregion” Ybarra specifically explores prose and poetry emanating from the Rio Grande River Valley, focusing her analysis on the historical insight provided by Jovita González's collected folktales published in 1927. *Caballero* seems to contain environmental-consciousness intertwined with a spirited novelization of American, Mexican and hybrid cultures and experiences emerging out of border conflicts. Ultimately, this novel overtly represents the waning of Spanish-Mexican patriarchy as a side-effect of the shifting U.S./Mexico border, an

event which has ramifications on the contemporary cultural beliefs of gender and the phenomenon of femicides in the borderland.

As Ybarra discusses, González's prose and poetry, particularly because of its folkloric elements, illustrates the intersecting of humanity and nature. In much of her work, especially so in *Caballero*, nature is a strong force. Her stories are often about misconceptions that humans have about nature and their place within the ecosystem, and they strip it away. Like most folklore, humanity's insistence on being separate from the environment is scrutinized and challenged on ethical, moral, religious, and cultural grounds. Throughout *Caballero*, there are a number of scenes that depict characters forming an intimate connections with nature—reconstituting themselves in a bigger, less self-centered, environment—as a means to construct new, different or alternative cultural, national, and political identities. *Caballero* opens and closes with Don Santiago, one of the last remaining and proud Spanish-Mexican patriarchs who have controlled the land for generations, fighting to preserve his and his ancestor's way of life. Don Santiago has several meditations about nature and the state of his existence within that ecosystem as a means to justify his masculine identity. In particular, the two scenes depict instances where Don Santiago thrusts his hands into the dirt as a performative act. The first scene of cultural reaffirmation through nature comes as Don Santiago decides to relocate his family to Matamoros in order to join forces with other wealthy rancheros in solidarity against invading American forces. The narrator describe the scene as follows:

Don Santiago scooped up earth and looked at it, and as he looked, possession took him in the grip of its pride, and he gave himself to it as a shameless woman to a lover. He struck out with empty hand at the man with the quiet eyes, and

struck again and again. He walked to the edge of the bluff, and saw the hacienda gleaming like an opal in a setting of gold. ‘Mine,’ he whispered. ‘Mine!’ Ecstasy filled him, lifted him, and held him suspended. He open his palm and looked at the earth he held, and doubled his fingers over it again.<sup>54</sup>

Gendered conceptions of nature are often convoluted and shifting. In this scene we see the land as a symbol of unrelenting strength, which is conflated with machismo. Earlier in the project we saw both Moraga and Anzaldúa correlate female identity with the land. Here, however, the land is not feminized, instead Don Santiago conceives of nature as an extension of his Spanish-Mexican masculine identity. Interestingly, Don Santiago imagines giving himself to the masculine earth as if he is a shameless woman, an identity that is marked by its weakness and fallibility in spite of what is best for the family or community. Don Santiago imagines and performs this act because he is under threat of emasculation by American invasion; in this passage he is violently beating back the feminine qualities of his identity that contradict his machismo. Much of the novel is devoted to exploring the aspects of Spanish-Mexican patriarchy and Don Santiago is demonstrating that masculine identity and the land are culturally unified. Ultimately, Don Santiago views the land as evidence of his patriarchal position. It is through this gendered conception of nature that Don Santiago resolves to combat invading American forces. Because the land and its inspiring qualities are incorrectly represented as everlasting, Don Santiago wrongly believes in the eternality of his patriarchal position and control over the land. Don Santiago comes to see reality as he loses his family, land, and life.

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<sup>54</sup> González and Raleigh 173.

This passage is vital to understand the intersection nature and culture in the borderland. The Rio Grande River Valley becomes a contested space of two dominant, male-oriented cultures. In effect, Don Santiago is fighting American influences on many fronts, many of which are conflated with gender. In reference to the above passage, Don Santiago's use of the image of the shameless woman that alludes to the pervasive myth of La Malinche. The term itself has become a pejorative for female identity, and its cultural foundations continue to subjugate women in Mexican and Chicano/a culture. Moraga, in *Loving in the War Years*, claims that "the sexual legacy passed down to the mexicana/Chicana is the legacy of betrayal, pivoting around the historical/mythical female figure of Malintzín Tenepal. As a Native woman and translator, strategic adviser and mistress to the Spanish conqueror of México, Hernán Cortéz, Malintzín is considered the mother of the mestizo people."<sup>55</sup> While the novel never makes an explicit reference to La Malinche, Don Santiago's identification with the woman is indicative of the fear that Americans are the Hernán Cortéz and any one of his daughters, or any pure-blood Spanish-Mexican woman for that matter, is the Malintzín of the modern era.<sup>56</sup> This perpetuates the idea that women are inherently vulnerable and fallible, which is an embodiment of the conception of La Chingada, or a woman who is responsible for corrupting the pure, natural, or indigenous societal order with her body and sexuality. Don Santiago perpetuates the harmful female image through this performative act, situating the land as the means to enforce female purity. His fears are represented in this passage and throughout the novel as he obsesses over the threat of miscegenation. Don Santiago continually alludes to his family's bloodline that can be traced to

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<sup>55</sup> Moraga 91.

<sup>56</sup> This action is hypocritical given that Don Santiago traces his root to the Spanish conquistadors.

the Spanish conquistadors, and so blood, like the dirt, symbolizes his claim to patriarchal dominion over land and women. At the height of his fears, Don Santiago reminds Susanita that “A true lady...knows that her honor must be kept unsoiled above all else, because it belongs also to her family, is part of a proud name and the first obligation to the master of the house.”<sup>57</sup> Anzaldúa succinctly writes about Chicano patriarchy stating that “culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles.”<sup>58</sup> Throughout the novel, Don Santiago loses each of the women under his domain to American men and the opportunity of freedom. Don Santiago’s eldest daughter rebelliously leaves her family for an American man, which results in Susanita’s excommunication from the family. This hateful action causes his wife, sister, and eldest daughter to abandon him due to his stubbornness and domineering treatment of the women in the family. Marcia McMahon, author of “Politicizing Spanish-Mexican Domesticity, Redefining *Fronteras*,” analyzes *Caballero* for its rhetorical means of reinscribing harmful gender roles that perpetuate female repression. Specifically, she states:

González illustrates how patriarchal confinement of Spanish-Mexican women to the private sphere was built on the dual view of women as objects of property necessary to protect the supposed purity of “Spanish” bloodlines and as sites of sexual chastity necessary to continue a patriarchal Mexican code of honor. In

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<sup>57</sup> González and Raleigh 279.

<sup>58</sup> Anzaldúa 40.

Spanish colonial societies of the “New World,” Spanish-Mexican men’s honor was upheld by enforcing female purity.<sup>59</sup>

Don Santiago’s fears of miscegenation and cultural impurity are the reasons for his animosity toward American invaders and his harsh treatment of his daughters with respect to their interactions with American males. Moraga, like Anzaldúa writing about Chicano/a culture’s fervent protection of the family unit, criticizes the ulterior patriarchal motives of Chicanos, which is demonstrated by Gonzáles and Raleigh in *Caballero*. Moraga writes, “the Chicano male does not hold fast to the family unit merely to safeguard it from the death-dealings of the anglo,” instead seeking to institutionalize women as domestic servants of men.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, it is Don Santiago’s irrational, xenophobic fear of miscegenation and his rigid traditional patriarchal beliefs that erode the core of his family beyond repair. Don Santiago’s use of gendered imagery and his a defiant rhetoric in regards to female and cultural purity are evidence of far more than the perceived threat of miscegenation; it is also evidence of the continuation of male-dominated cultural beliefs that are intertwined with conceptions of nature. All of this illustrates the foundations of cultural female subjugation and violence against women within the Chicano/a community that Anzaldúa, Moraga, and others dig into.

While the text can be primarily described as a romance novel between Susanita and Robert Warrener, Gonzáles and Raleigh situated the love story in the historical setting to add layers of political, cultural, and gender critique. As an environmental text, we can see the ways

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<sup>59</sup> Marcia McMahon, “Politicizing Spanish-Mexican Domesticity, Redefining Fronteras : Jovita González's *Caballero* and Cleofas Jaramillo's *Romance of a Little Village Girl*." (Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, 28.1, 2007). 240.

<sup>60</sup> Moraga 102.

that patriarchy and nature are conflated to a disastrous end, and González and Raleigh critique Spanish-Mexican male identity through poignant narration and dialogue. By situating a forbidden romance within this historical setting of war, the authors essentially argue that the borderland is a place of persistent gender-specific struggle and tragedy. In addition, the conflict between the two nations also represented an opportunity to liberate women from a traditional rigid social structure.

We typically see Don Santiago interacting with nature to reaffirm his masculinity, but González and Raleigh position Susanita as a secondary protagonist who discovers her agency created out of the border conflict. In a brave effort to prevent the execution of her brother, Susanita defies traditional expectations of women by riding a horse through the night without a chaperon, something that she knows will bring shame to her and her family regardless of her success.<sup>61</sup> Witnesses of her action in neighboring communities remark, “when the señorita rides astride like a man and alone with a peón, the world is falling to pieces.”<sup>62</sup> Don Santiago, in fact, strongly restricted her desire to ride a horse as she became a woman. Everything about her action to save her brother is in complete rebellion of cultural gender expectations of women. Not only is the act of riding a horse unwomanly, Susanita is taught to believe that nature is filled with “*gringo* bandits, Mexican robbers, Indian marauders, and at the end of the trail, the hate-filled

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<sup>61</sup> Her elder brother, Alvaro, full of machismo and hatred toward the American invasion because of his father’s rhetoric, leaves the family to form a group rancheros-turned-guerilla soldiers. Known as El Lobo, he and his compatriots become something of a legend as they successfully wounding or killing a number of American soldiers. His violent actions eventually lead to his capture in Matamoros, where he is to be hanged for his crimes. Within the context of the novel, Alvaro is the physical and spiritual successor to Don Santiago, and the embodiment of his rage and bravado.

<sup>62</sup> González and Raleigh 261.

Rangers inflamed by their killings and plundering,” which means that all men are evil and lustful.<sup>63</sup> Which is to say, Susanita, and women in general, are made to believe that the environment outside the walls of the hacienda are inherently dangerous to women, reinforcing an identity of vulnerability. While aware of the consequences of her actions, Susanita confidently decides to disobey what she sees now as an arbitrary and repressive gendered cultural foundation. The narrator describes Susanita riding through the night as if “wings were on her shoulders and she soared in a world that was free. She was alone in it and free, free—so soaringly, blissfully free—.”<sup>64</sup> In a scene that parallels Don Santiago’s communion of body and nature, Susanita symbolically and physically reconstitutes her identity with nature as she is coated in dirt and dust—dirt that is kicked up by her rebellious action.<sup>65</sup> As she becomes coated metaphorically and literally by the land, she destabilizes its symbolism and patriarchal function; she fundamentally appropriates an aspect of La Malinche, a woman who is so powerful as to transgress borders and move between spaces typically forbidden. As she rides, “it seemed to Susanita as mile after mile of moon-brushed plain met them and slipped behind that she was a different person entirely. As if the love-struck, weeping, frightened girl was still in the patio spilling tears on a wedding dress, and a woman who looked like her was riding in a world that, also, was a new and different one.”<sup>66</sup> This is the only moment in the text when a woman connects with the land, and it represents Susanita’s liberation. Whereas Don Santiago conceives of the

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<sup>63</sup> González and Raleigh 262-263.

<sup>64</sup> González and Raleigh 263.

<sup>65</sup> González and Raleigh 367.

<sup>66</sup> González and Raleigh 263.



land as his source of strength, Susanita alternatively discovers that the same power is accessible to her. Susanita's liberating act is a success, but her action renders her an object of scorn in the eyes of Don Santiago and Alvaro, the brother she saved. Her defiance eventually inspires her mother, aunt, and sister to rebel against Don Santiago, especially after Don Santiago angrily exiles Susanita for her actions. In effect, González and Raleigh destabilize the cultural connection masculinity and nature, offering a new conception that foreshadows gender progress, certainly in regards to Latinas and Chicanas in the borderland.

González and Raleigh echo the motif of dirt in the final scene of the novel, which involves Don Santiago's death. Similar to the first passage referenced, Don Santiago reconnects with nature to overcome his perceived emasculation. Don Santiago's first scene displays his flawed perception of nature and cultural identity. The last scene features Don Santiago dying alone atop a hill with "a scoop of Earth, brown and dry, [trickling] from the palm and [losing] itself in the sandstones."<sup>67</sup> Warrener, the American man who marries Don Santiago's youngest daughter, Susanita—the modern Cortéz and Malintzín of the story—is the one who opens Don Santiago's hand, allowing the dirt to seep in between his fingers and back to the earth. The significance of Don Santiago's death scene is understood by the symbolically emasculating events that precede it. As mentioned, Don Santiago eventually loses the women in his family because of his domineering personality. He then suffers another loss, his son. Alvaro's death at the hands of Texas Rangers foreshadows Don Santiago's, because his eldest son embodied the worst aspects of the patriarchal culture.<sup>68</sup> Don Santiago's death scene, therefore, can be read in

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<sup>67</sup> González and Raleigh 337.

<sup>68</sup> González and Raleigh 307-309.

many ways. On the one hand, Warrener's actions in this scene might suggest his symbolic victory over Don Santiago, both as land owner and patriarch. I argue that González and Raleigh depict Don Santiago's metaphorical burial, and with him goes a Spanish-Mexican patriarchal system, which is illustrated by the land eluding his grasp—it is no longer a source of Spanish-Mexican masculine identity. And, given Susanita's pivotal scene discussed earlier, it is clear that the cultural symbolism of nature is not unilaterally gendered. However, the dirt slipping through Don Santiago's fingers to be lost among the sandstone also suggests that the patriarchy lives on.

González and Raleigh in *Caballero* are adept at describing the social and cultural historical context that created generations of female subjugation, much of the same foundation that underpins the current crisis at the borderland. In an effort to conceive of slow violence properly, an intergenerational narrative must be traced between several texts to illustrate the scope of the violence. *Caballero* depicts male and female identities intersecting with nature during the Mexican-American War, offering yet another example of an ecocritical text that imaginatively captured the harmful ways that gender and the environment can become conflated. Like Ybarra, I argue that *Caballero*, despite some of its controversy, represents an important early Chicana narrative that, when read in conjunction with contemporary Chicana literature, illustrates a decades-long narrative of Chicanas fighting against pervasive patriarchy. There are no acts of violence toward women in *Caballero*, only threats and fears. Of course, there are hearsay comments throughout the novel that suggest women are being raped, but the text is not interested in real acts of sexual violence as much as it aims to examine the ways that women overcome the threat of violence in search of liberation. Shifting from *Caballero* to *Desert Blood* means glossing over fifty years of history. The world of González and Raleigh is long behind,

because the border region is infinitely more complex in ways that they could not have even predicted. Little has been done to thwart sexual violence toward women. While the borderland is not conceived as an example of slow violence, at least in the sense that danger, degradation, oppression and disenfranchisement are not elevated to the modern degree. These are the first signs of a creeping environmental phenomenon that has become exacerbated over time.

#### *4.2. The New Mestiza Consciousness: Deconstructing Systemic Slow Violence in the Borderland*

Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* is a unique text in many ways.<sup>69</sup> The text reads as hardboiled fiction, creatively deconstructing the traditional male-dominated genre by presenting a queer, Chicana detective using her identities to solve the case of her missing sister. In true hardboiled fashion, the narrative makes strong use of many of its tropes such as an internal monologue, an international conspiracy, an epic clash of morals, and many twists and turns in a convoluted plot. *Desert Blood* tells the story of Ivon Villa, a women studies professor who returns home to El Paso to adopt a soon-to-be-born boy from a desperate pregnant mother, Cecilia, working in a maquiladora. While the reader is not aware, the first chapter of the novel grotesquely describes Cecilia's torture and murder. Ivon quickly learns that Cecilia is one victim of hundred in what is a growing epidemic of gender violence in the borderland. For Ivon, the tragic murder of Cecilia compels her to investigate the problem from both sides of the border. The narrative dramatically shifts when Irene, Ivon's sixteen-year-old sister is kidnapped presumably under the same pretenses of other abductions of women in the region. What follows

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<sup>69</sup> It is later revealed that the woman and baby were murdered.

is a detective story where Ivon's unique ability to operate in the border results in the rescue of her sister.

The rural world of González and Raleigh is also a thing of the past, in that the once fertile land has become an overpopulated, polluted, and desolated environment. Due to rapid modernization and industrialization, women are free to move around the border region unlike in *Caballero*, which means that they are in more places of real, *not imagined*, violence. Steven Volk and Marian Schlotterbeck try to conceive of the femicides afflicting the border region in their article, "Gender, Order, and Femicide: Reading the Popular Culture of Murder in Ciudad Juárez."<sup>70</sup> Volk and Schlotterbeck identify "large parcels of urban space that never reached developmental stage and that are simply left vacant," and they go on to say that any movement through the city forces particularly "poor women on foot to traverse these lotes baldíos, spaces in which the bodies of murdered women are frequently found."<sup>71</sup> Unlike in *Caballero* where the female characters are forced to reside in the home lest they become victims, modern economic and social freedom has created a much more hostile environment as studied and discussed by Fragoso, Olivera and Furio, Pantaleo, Verduzco Chavez and Shekhter. Volk and Schlotterbeck advance the studies and discussions of the aforementioned, attempting to make sense of the intersectionality of gender, sex, sexuality, culture, and socioeconomic factors that result in the tragic borderland crisis. Like others discussed above, Volk and Schlotterbeck argue that rapid modernization and industrialization have resulted in a "new consciousness [that] has generated challenges to traditional identities," making the borderland into a "very real territory of power

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<sup>70</sup> Steven Volk and Marian Schlotterbeck, "Gender, Order, and Femicide Reading the Popular Culture of Murder in Ciudad Juárez," (*Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 31.1, 2007). 53-86.

<sup>71</sup> Volk and Schlotterbeck 57.

and violence.”<sup>72</sup> Don Santiago’s fight to retain Spanish-Mexican patriarchy relied on women residing in the home in complete subservience to men. Furthermore, Anzaldúa dug into her cultural past to show that “for a woman of [Chicano] culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother,” which is effectively how we see the women in *Caballero*.<sup>73</sup> Volk and Schlotterbeck argue that these gender roles have been radically exacerbated by industrialization, and that “the replacement of male with female workers challenged existing patriarchal structures and generated a deep well of male resentment and female vulnerability.”<sup>74</sup> Their analysis helps to identify the ways that sex, sexuality, race, and nature are conflated in this region, which reveals the dauntingly pervasive patriarchal system that exists at the border. Ultimately, they are able to articulate the historical, traditional roots of the problems facing the borderland today. Part of what Volk and Schlotterbeck study is the aftermath of NAFTA in the region with respect to the confluence of different forms of violence playing out over decades. The area remains contaminated by tons of pollutants distributed over decades; the land that symbolized pride and power (albeit predominantly by men) has been converted to a wasteland of concrete and steel.

In effect, Gaspar de Alba’s novel tears at the floorboards and digs into the dirt of the borderland between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, a major site of slow violence. Irene Mata, author of “Writing on the Walls: Deciphering Violence and Industrialization in Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Desert Blood*,” states, “the maquiladora is a site where multiple forms of both local and global

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<sup>72</sup> Volk and Schlotterbeck 56.

<sup>73</sup> Anzaldúa 39.

<sup>74</sup> Volk and Schlotterbeck 57-58.

oppression come together,” and Gaspar de Alba, much like Volk and Schlotterbeck who say that it is a “real territory of power and violence,” fictionalizes this setting in order to critique the complicated slow violence in the borderland.<sup>75</sup> The convoluted reality of the region prevents us from knowing an exact number of women who have been kidnapped, raped and/or murdered. Hundreds of bodies have been found scattered across the desert in both rural and urban areas, and that is only a fraction of the thousands of women reported missing. The description of the femicides are horrific, and Gaspar de Alba means to present that reality in its full graphic detail. By situating the maquiladora industry within the larger problem of globalization, nation-states becomes directly implicated in the exploitation and oppression of its people.

Despite writing a hardboiled crime thriller, Gaspar de Alba incorporates real stories and testimony regarding the murder of women in the borderland; functioning as a sort of journalist, Gaspar de Alba is trying to display the grotesque degradation occurring in the borderland. Gaspar de Alba does not personally represent a subaltern position (relative to the victims), although she incorporates subaltern voices to politicize *Desert Blood*. In an effort to demonstrate the authenticity of the novel, Gaspar de Alba admits that some of the suspects and the public figures that appear in this book are appropriated from newspaper and television reports, but most importantly, “the victims are a composite of real-life victims,” which illustrates her commitment to giving space for subaltern voices.<sup>76</sup> As a writer representing women who do not have control over their voices, or bodies for that matter, the ethics of this novel and the authenticity of its narrative is certainly problematic. Aware of this criticism, Gaspar de Alba stresses that it is not

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<sup>75</sup> Irene Mata, "Writing on the Walls: Deciphering Violence and Industrialization in Alicia Gaspar De Alba's *Desert Blood*," (MELUS, 35.3, 2010). 22.

<sup>76</sup> Gaspar de Alba v.

“[her] intention in this story to sensationalize the crimes or capitalize on the losses of so many families, but to expose the horrors of this deadly crime wave as broadly as possible to the english-speaking public, and to offer some conjecture, based on research, based what [she] knows about the place on the map, some plausible explanation for the silence that has surrounded the murders.<sup>77</sup> One of the central questions of *Desert Blood* is, who speaks for the dead? As the author, Gaspar de Alba challenges the limitations of fiction, devising, as Anna Sandoval suggests, a “new” fictional form, laced with testimonio, in order to let the unheard speak and share an experience.<sup>78</sup> While the fictional narrative is certainly twisted and violent, the *real* testimonial accounts of violence against women are inserted throughout the novel to remind readers that the story is not fiction for women living in the borderland right now. Therefore, *Desert Blood* explicitly aims to resolve, what Nixon calls, “contests over what counts as violence” and the dilemma of “who [can] bear the social authority to witness.”<sup>79</sup> As an author, Gaspar de Alba is very clear about her inabilities to represent real experiences of others; she is, however, choosing to bear that social authority and expand it to a larger audience through literature. As Schaffer and Smith argue, the inclusion of testimony is a political move to ensure the greatest amount of agency for the victims. In that spirit, Gaspar de Alba does not shy away from presenting the graphic reality of femicides as informed by testimony from eye-witness accounts and survivors. An omniscient narrator usually recounts the tragic situations of several women. In the novel’s opening scene, the nameless woman “[tries] to scream, but someone [hits]

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<sup>77</sup> Gaspar de Alba iv.

<sup>78</sup> Sandoval 22.

<sup>79</sup> Nixon 16.

her on the mouth again, and someone else [stabs] into the bag of water and bones—that's all it is, the nurse at the factory once told her, a bag of water and bones."<sup>80</sup> In this moment the woman both realizes and experiences the materiality of her female body. To her, this represents her inherent vulnerability. To the men performing these heinous acts, it naturalizes the female body as a means to justify exploitation. Gaspar de Alba's writing in this passage illustrates Moraga's criticism of the female body as Earth, or nature; and much like the earth, this nameless woman's cries are also silenced. While artfully crafted, the Gaspar de Alba's testimonial narrative creates an unnerving effect. Readers are forced to reconsider the materiality of not just the woman's body, but their own; readers, therefore, become intimately connected with the victim as the horrors unfurl. Gaspar de Alba means to show that this is the reality for far too many women, and it is a direct result of the ways that both the land and women have been devalued and degraded in this borderland. Through writer-activists like Moraga and Anzaldúa, we know that the environment and materiality cannot be separated from the minutia of intersecting identities. As a skilled writer, Gaspar de Alba weaves testimony from victims, survivors, and witnesses to produce the sensation of realness necessary to inspire action, which, in effect, politicizes the text beyond simple fiction. Therefore, *Desert Blood* is an example of activist literature for social and environmental justice.

The testimonial qualities of the novel are paramount to conceive of this text as an example of writer-activism centered on slow violence. Gaspar de Alba's choice to include testimony bolsters the text's political power in search of justice. Small, but captivating, uses of subaltern voices and experiences are only some of many unique qualities of *Desert Blood*. As

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<sup>80</sup> Gaspar de Alba 2.



saliently articulated by theories and writer-activists like Moraga and Anzaldúa, the borderland is a space of intersectionality and hybridity; survival in the borderland is rooted in one's ability cross borders. The queer, feminist ecocritical writing of Anzaldúa and Moraga strongly resonates throughout Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*. The novel depicts the continued progress of women in the borderland under the persistent threat of violence. However, Alicia Gaspar de Alba means to offer alternative perspective of the borderland violence, including voices and experiences that run counter to normative, patriarchal narratives. Therefore, Gaspar de Alba stitches together a network of women who each work to discover and combat what very few see as a pattern of sexual violence against women.

Most importantly, unlike most hardboiled crime fiction, *Desert Blood* is not a story of a lone detective. Counter to the norm, the narrative highlights a community of women working collectively to solve the confluence of sexual violence and environmental degradation in the borderland. Ximena, Ivon's cousin, is one of the notable characters in the novel. Ximena is responsible for representing Ivon in the adoption of Cecilia's child, and, as a member of the Contra de Silencio non-profit, she is able to gain the trust of the oppressed women in Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. Ximena's contacts with women north and south of the border help her and Ivon to visit the morgue and investigate Cecilia's body, which leads Ivon on her path to find the criminals responsible.<sup>81</sup> Later in the novel, Ximena brokers another adoption for Ivon, this time a young boy with a mother, Elsa, with stage four ovarian cancer, a disease which appears to be a direct result of birth control pills forced on Elsa by a maquiladora. Ximena's immense knowledge of human rights violations in the maquiladoras assists her and Ivon's search for

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<sup>81</sup> Gaspar de Alba 15-16.

justice amidst the complicated web of slow violence in the borderland. In effect, Ximena functions as the cultural, political, and legal translator as well as the go-between insider who is able to straddle the borderland.<sup>82</sup> Another important female character, Rubi Reyna, is a local news reporter who happens to be one of the few official voices reporting on the femicides in the borderland. She also uses her networking skills to help Ivon, Ximena, and her personal goals in raising local and international interest and outrage in regards to violence against women. As a journalist, Rubi's ability to cross the police line, speak to families of victims, investigate grave sites, and interview officials across several involved organizations is representative of her ability to move among both official and unofficial areas of the borderland fluidly, which is something Ivon and Ximena cannot do to the same degree. She also carries with her a public display of power, a fact which becomes vital for the survival of Ivon and Williams arrest by two corrupt Mexican judiciales.<sup>83</sup> In a departure from tradition, this crime thriller does not contain the trope of femme fatales, instead presenting complex people with a range of abilities. Each of the women profess a deep connection to the femicides of Ciudad Juárez, alluding to feelings of a cultural trauma and collective identity of women in the borderland discussed by Alexander. For all of these characters, the femicides are rooted in the very identity of what it means to be a woman living in the borderland, torn apart by two worlds, and they are using this shared trauma to empower themselves and others.

Community and shared struggle are major elements of Gaspar de Alba's testimonial novel that aims to elevate collective experiences and narratives of an oppressed women in the

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<sup>82</sup> Gaspar de Alba 92-93.

<sup>83</sup> Gaspar de Alba 218.

borderland. As a novel, *Desert Blood* illustrates the power of writer-activists, or people whose ability to write and collect materials and experiences to weave imaginative and impactful stories for environmental and social justice. In effect, Gaspar de Alba writes about the modern borderland crisis in much the same way as González and Raleigh did before. Gaspar de Alba's characters embody the traits highlighted by Anzaldúa's seminal theory. Moreover, *Desert Blood's* protagonist, Ivon Villa, is an embodiment of "new mestiza consciousness" as a queer Chicana who uses her identities to navigate the borderland, cross physical, social, and sexual borders to discover the pattern of sexism and environmental degradation that results in the phenomenon. While several women represent qualities of hybridity and an extra-ability to move throughout the borderland, Ivon Villa is uniquely positioned. Ivon's return home to El Paso is wrought with family drama as Ivon confronts her estranged and homophobic mother. In many ways, Ivon is digging into the floorboards of her family in as much as borderland violence against women. What is more important than the struggles are the instances where her "borderland" identities grant her power and authority over domains that enable her to uncover a complex plot of slow violence. The character of Ivon effectively stands in for the masculine figure head of hardboiled crime thrillers, complete with an internal monologue that see the pattern in the fog. Ivon's education, knowledge of the Spanish language and sexual ambiguity are politicized features of her body and intellect. Her body and identities directly challenge what men see as a typical submissive Mexican border woman, which empowers more than most.

Gaspar de Alba continues the political struggles developed by Moraga in more than one way, however. If the female body is equated with nature, or as Moraga phrases, "If women's bodies and those of men and women who transgress their gender roles have been historically

regarded as territories to be conquered, they are also territories to be liberated.”<sup>84</sup> This means that the community must dig at what grounds Chicano/a identity so that rampant environmental and sexual violence can end. This logic identifies a social system of ignoring the sexual violence of women. Whereas *Caballero* explores early Spanish-Mexican and American patriarchal systems, *Desert Blood* dissects the modern hybrid, Chicano masculine identity that bears witness to, commits and perpetrates real sexual violence against women. In *Caballero*, however, the dialogic narrative might inhibit deep self-criticism within the Chicano/a community, and Gaspar de Alba displays no such hesitancy. Ivon Villa is a queer Chicana feminist character that moves relatively freely within the borderland; her body and hybrid national identities allow her to cross the border, enter into the poorest of neighborhoods, go to the “seedy” bars in Ciudad Juárez or utilize what little resources are available in El Paso. Ivon’s research and scholarship as well as her queer identity enable to find subaltern voices that aid her in her search for Irene.<sup>85</sup> She is, as Mata discusses in her article, able to read the writing on the wall of female bathrooms, the location where she finds the “prophet” that helps to uncover the thread that ties this whole crisis together.<sup>86</sup> In effect, she performs and embodies the new mestiza consciousness and the concept of the border crosser elucidated by Anzaldúa. This is demonstrated in a rather long stream-of-consciousness that concludes her investigation into this border crisis. The narrator states:

She saw the order of the cards, now. The threat that pregnancy posed to “free trade” revenue. The heavy policing of female reproductive power in the

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<sup>84</sup> Moraga 150.

<sup>85</sup> talking to the transvestites (206-208)

<sup>86</sup> Ivon finding the writing on the bathroom stalls of a ladies bar in Ciudad Juárez. “Es una fabric circa de Jesus” (210-212)

maquiladoras to safeguard that revenue. The use of pregnancy tests to filter the desirable from the undesirable, who were still desirable in another context. The overt sexualization of the bodies—not just murder, but violation and mutilation of the material organs, the breasts and nipples, the wombs and vaginas. The use of the Internet as a worldwide market for these same organs in easily assessable tourist sites and affordable online pornography. A cost-effective way of disposing of non-productive/reproductive surplus labor while simultaneously protecting the border from infiltration by brown breeding female bodies.<sup>87</sup>

Irene Mata suggests that Ivon is “outside of the heteronormative construction of sexuality” where she are able “to develop a consciousness that allows [them] to see beneath the surface and draw connections not easily recognized.”<sup>88</sup> Within the context of the novel, this stream-of-consciousness marks the most complete analysis of the border crisis of sexual violence against women. As a researcher and writer, Ivon, and by extension Gaspar de Alba, is a writer-activist that is able to simplify and imaginatively capture the slow violence occurring in the borderland. She is able to perceive the modern Chicano machismo that fuels female sexual violence, and she is able to link modern misogyny with general American devaluation and exploitation of others. In the above passage, inherent sexism and misogyny are shown to permeate far beyond the border, existing on the internet and virtually in any place. This, of course, is not to say that NAFTA is a policy to exploit the environment, women, and the culture rooted in the land, but that is the effect when centuries of sexism and racism continue along side and are exacerbated by

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<sup>87</sup> Gaspar de Alba 333.

<sup>88</sup> Mata 23-24.

intrusions into the land. Furthermore, because of Ivon's queer identity, she is able to move across the border, playing the unassuming woman despite being far more capable than most; she is able to utilize her past relationships with women that give her access to information that leads her to find her sister or to conceive of the pattern of sexual violence in the borderland. As Peña, Moraga, and Anzaldúa describe, Ivon is able to go to places inaccessible to men, and she is able to perceive and deconstruct masculinity while displaying her sexuality successfully.

All of these features make Ivon an ideal writer-activist to profile the slow violence of the borderland. In the area where the Third World grates against the first world, it is women that are continually torn apart by sexism and misogyny on either side of the border. Anzaldúa's metaphor of the borderland as an open wound is extended throughout this novel before explicitly culminating in the following passage:

Somewhere out there, under the impassive limestone face of Cristo Rey and the pervasive, fetid fumes of a copper smelter, a prophet was writing on bathroom walls, and rosebuds were dropping like blood over the desert. The lights started to flash on one then a second and a third of the Border Patrol vans stationed down on the levee. She turned back on the view: *La Migra* and *Las colonias*, the smokestacks and Cristo Rey, the river a brown snack meandering between two worlds. The spot held no more magic for her, now. If anything, it was the spot where the open wound of the border was most visible.<sup>89</sup>

Through Ivon's internal monologue, Gaspar de Alba uses very strong images to depict the way that nature, sexuality, and violence intersect in this region. First, she calls attention to the

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<sup>89</sup> Gaspar de Alba 335.

limestone as a way to show that the cultural institutions resurrected literally out of the land of this region have been complicit, if not responsible. She then calls attention to copper as a means to show patriarchal objectification and greed manifested in the ownership (and devaluation) of the female body.<sup>90</sup> Part of what Gaspar de Alba is doing in this passage is intersecting sexual violence in the borderland with decades of pollution brought about by policies such as NAFTA. Like Gloria Anzaldúa, Alicia Gaspar de Alba is interested in exploring the reasons for the borderland being a space where the Third World grates against the First with disastrous results. The desert blood that spills in the narrative is the result of the inherent violence of the borderland. Throughout *Desert Blood*, rivers, air, and female bodies become contaminated in a way that illustrates Nixon's concept of slow violence. Finally, she shows how this crisis endures under the supposed vigilant eyes of both American and Mexican federal and local officials. It is in the passage that Ivon identifies what Volk, Schlotterbeck, and Mata argue in regards to slow violence in the borderland. This novel begins with Ivon Villa returning home, reflecting on all that she had missed being away, but she ends with a stark reality that demystifies the borderland in a flood of violence. Through Ivon, Gaspar de Alba means to transcend pastoral impressions of the borderland because they no longer exist; what exists now is a harsh and degraded environment that has developed alongside terrible female subjugation and sexual violence. In reference to the final scene of *Caballero*, with the sand slipping back into the earth, Ivon perceives the gradual return of harsh, restrictive conditions on women in the form of

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<sup>90</sup> Several of the victims are revealed to have coins in bodies of victims. As it turns out, these coins, pennies, were fed to the women to slowly poison them while symbolically devaluing their bodies. In the text, Ivon notes that they are always American coins and never Mexican, suggesting that American economic influence is to blame. In a more tragic sense, the amount of money found in the women closely matched the wage earned working in the maquiladoras.

transnationalism, multinational corporations, and other male-dominated interest groups that have combined to corrupt the borderland and endanger its inhabitants, disproportionately affecting dispossessed women. Tracing this intergenerational narrative from *Caballero* to *Desert Blood* illustrates what one narrative alone could not; the region's damages are laid bare, revealing the creep of toxic ideologies and policies being worsened by unsustainable choices.

#### *4.3. Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity: Intergenerational Narratives that Bare Witness to the Dangers of Crossing and Living in the Borderland*

Reading Gonzales and Raleigh's *Caballero* with Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood* helps us to trace an intergenerational narrative of slow violence located in a borderland where gender, race, nationality, and ecology conflate. Both of these narratives are examples of environmentally-conscious writer-activism, and both are narratives that saliently profile and deconstruct the border conflict from its formation and up to the modern borderland. The concept of slow violence hinges on the idea of the populous being far too narrow-minded with respect to the pervasive effects of inequality, human rights violations, and environmental degradation. Given our current media and popular culture climate, comprehending slow violence is difficult, but literature is a powerful rhetorical tool for political and social change. Priscilla Solis Ybarra, then, looks to Chicana/o literature as place of rich ecocritical narratives that might serve to inform wider audiences of the complex issues facing hard-stricken and historically disenfranchised communities or groups of people. Establishing a dialectical intergenerational narrative helps to historically contextualize political, social, and environmental activism in the region.

This quality, or creative use of intergenerational narratives, is an often celebrated feature of Ana Castillo's prose. Castillo's *The Guardians* weaves together the unique, and collectively



profound, narrators involved in a violent and tragic story of kidnap and murder in the perilous U.S./Mexico borderland. The interwoven narrative incorporates four distinct voices across three generations confronting the realities of the conflation of race, gender and violence. Castillo's intergenerational narrative is the culmination of this project's exploration into the confluence of gender violence and environmental degradation played out over decades. While tinged with a bit of surrealism and drama, this story remains grounded in a sense of unfortunate realism, which confronts the realities of femicides and human trafficking in the borderland.

Like Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Ana Castillo is invested in the cultural trauma caused by the borderland that affects a collective identity of countless. For Castillo, the borderland represents a region of peril, and yet so many people flock to the border or cross it. Castillo writes of being haunted by the ancestors who have struggled to live in or cross borders, alluding to an intergenerational phenomenon.<sup>91</sup> Castillo admits "it would be presumptuous, even arrogant, to say that [she] gives voice to the otherwise silenced. What would they say if they thought they'd be heard? And would they really trust anyone with the authority to let them say it?"<sup>92</sup> She goes on to say that she can only hope that she "can summon the very real voices of the people" that reside in the "collective memory" of people living in the borderland.<sup>93</sup> With a belief in collective storytelling, Castillo brings to life victims, survivors and relatives of both in a tragic story of kidnap, torture and murder. The desert land that permeates much of the region is treated as a

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<sup>91</sup> Castillo 217.

<sup>92</sup> Castillo 219.

<sup>93</sup> Castillo 219.

wasteland consumed with violence because of the coyotes and narcos that “own the desert.”<sup>94</sup>

The borderland’s natural dangers, along with the ever-present threat of being apprehended by border patrol, necessitates the dependence on coyotes or narcos to cross. The ancestors that haunt, or the silenced that populate the collective memory, guide the narrative of *The Guardians*, bringing a voice to the thousands of people who have suffered to cross or live in the violent borderland.

Readers are made to see the cultural trauma posed by the modern violent borderland, which is represented through four narratives: Regina, Gabo, Miguel and El Abuelo Milton. While the central narrative is a disparate family coming together to find and rescue Rafa, the brother of Regina and father of Gabo, the interwoven perspectives retell events and memories that continue to reinforce the collective struggle of thousands of people who cross or live near the border. Castillo’s tragic narrative serves to report the horrors experienced by numerous people. The novel’s main characters become embroiled in a convoluted cartel plot of drugs and human trafficking. Rafa, who disappears while crossing from Mexico, is abducted by a human trafficking cartel that forces him and several other men to starve, be locked away in dirty cages, and to produce methamphetamines, exposing their skin and lungs to toxic chemicals.<sup>95</sup> Like *Caballero* and *Desert Blood*, Castillo’s *The Guardians* explores gender violence in the borderland. Years before the events of the novel, Rafa’s wife, Ximena was separated from Rafa by the coyotes while crossing the border; four days later, Ximena and three other women’s

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<sup>94</sup> Castillo 4.

<sup>95</sup> Castillo 207.

bodies were found in the desert, all having been mutilated for their organs.<sup>96</sup> Supposedly in retaliation for Miguel's interference with the Arellano family cartel while searching for Rafa, his ex-wife, Crucita, is abducted, sexually assaulted and held captive, along with several other women, by a "sociopathic" sexual predator.<sup>97</sup> The sexualized nature of tragic events discussed in the novel lead Regina to be consumed with feelings of helplessness.<sup>98</sup> Regina's feelings of helplessness are only escalated by what befalls her own family, which, as she knows, are by no means unique or rare. The stories of Rafa, Ximena, and Crucita are meant to represent the thousands that meet similar fates, and *The Guardians* is concerned with telling the stories of the families and communities that survive and experience the aftermath of such violence.

*Caballero* and *Desert Blood* each present a collection of characters who suffer from relative despair, which forces the female characters to unite to solve the issues that are felt by them all. In the former, the network of women is contained within a family; in the latter, a network of women is essential to investigate the femicides in the border towns of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, which ultimately saved the lives of several more women. Similarly, *The Guardians*, demonstrates Jeffery Alexander's theories on the collective identity and cultural trauma endured by a community of survivors. Trauma is most acutely illustrated through Gabo's perspective. While Gabo never quite admits that he is suffering from the death of his mother or the disappearance of his father, he often manifests patterns of anxiety and discomfort. Gabo and Regina must confront the realities of reliving the violent events that problematize the borderland.

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<sup>96</sup> Castillo 4.

<sup>97</sup> Castillo 182.

<sup>98</sup> Castillo 183.

Regina suggests that Gabo's mind has been sort of "stuck in that time when his mother didn't make it."<sup>99</sup> As Gabo's guardian, Regina must manage his fractured and weakening emotional state as Gabo develops signs of chronic insomnia, paranoia, depression and anxiety, all of which worsen with every day that they fail to find Rafa.<sup>100 101 102</sup> Ultimately, despite the very real physical and psychological problems that afflict Gabo's life throughout the novel, he is never without support from Regina, Miguel, and El Abuelo Milton. All of the characters attempt to share the burden, becoming guardians for one another, and all of the characters are able to empathize with the trauma that has infected the cultural identity of Chicanos/as, especially in the borderland. *The Guardians*, divided in to point-of-view chapters, illustrate the numerous ways that all the characters suffer with each other and the broader communities that they belong to. The belief in a collective identity is what fueled Castillo's creative process for the novel, and that belief is saliently embodied in each of the characters.

With the litany of problems that affect the characters and community in the novel, the ability to comprehend the reality or survive the ordeal is best accomplished through collective knowledge and action. In the foreground are the tragic human narratives that ripple throughout the community and across generations, but in the background is evidence of environmental degradation that represents the gradual decline of the region. Verduzco Chavez and Shekhter's study of the environmental issues that plague the borderland region are clearly referenced by

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<sup>99</sup> Castillo 4.

<sup>100</sup> Castillo 5.

<sup>101</sup> Castillo 98.

<sup>102</sup> Castillo 146.

Castillo in this text, particularly through the perspective of Miguel, a self-identified Chicano, whose political beliefs keep him firmly skeptical of American and Mexican policies or the dominant cultures that spark sustained border violence and environmental degradation. Both a teacher and eco-activist, Miguel protests and volunteers to help families affected by multinational corporations and transnational economic structures that have grossly polluted the region. In fact, Castillo writes Miguel as one of the men involved with preventing the reopening of the ASARCO smelting facility referenced in *Desert Blood*.<sup>103</sup> Like Ivon, Regina, Miguel and El Abuelo Milton all recall the smelter company that “belched fumes into [their] skies.”<sup>104</sup> Regina mentions that as a child when journeying to the U.S. she would “feel like the way immigrants must’ve felt seeing the Statue of Liberty. Those puffing chimneys were a pair of lamps, calling the huddled masses.”<sup>105</sup> Regina admits that she, and others, did not know any better, as she came to learn that the region’s air, soil, and water have been irreparably polluted. Miguel’s activist work shows readers the pervasive effects of prolonged exposure to such an environment, in which he recounts personal, or learned, stories of people, suffering from chronic diseases as results to high levels of lead, zinc, cadmium and arsenic.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, toward the novel’s climax, a warehouse containing petroleum products explodes, overtaking the skies with thick black smoke.<sup>107</sup> The suspicious explosion happens unexpectedly and without clear cause, which Castillo uses to symbolize the chaos of the borderland. Ana Castillo is also keen to

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<sup>103</sup> Castillo 51.

<sup>104</sup> Castillo 51.

<sup>105</sup> Castillo 51.

<sup>106</sup> Castillo 51.

<sup>107</sup> Castillo 145.

incorporate common natural disasters, such as drought and seasonal flooding, which are described by the characters as being worse with each passing year. As the characters frantically search for Rafa, the residents succumb to sweltering heat that causes widespread power outages and an epidemic of heat strokes in communities without in-home air conditioning and access to adequate health services. In fact, it is Miguel's critical perspective that highlights the region's poor infrastructure that disproportionately affects poor, Chicano/a and immigrant communities. Once the rains come to the region, much to the relief of the heat-stricken residents, homes are destroyed, and, because of the region's inadequate sewage infrastructure and toxic soil/ground water, they are literally flooded with contaminated waters.<sup>108</sup> All of these natural disasters or examples of environmental slow violence are described in regards to the communities, neighborhoods, school, families, and children that are affected. Castillo's ensemble cast of characters, in combination with a constant presence of the subaltern, positions *The Guardians* as a writer-activist text intertwined with the collective identity and cultural trauma of Chicanas/os.

As mentioned, all of the narrators function as guardians for one another. If not already clear, this tragic novel does not offer any solutions to this issues that plague the border. However, in the prose and theory of Anzaldúa and Moraga, community activism is imperative. Moreover, all of the scientific researchers referenced earlier say the same. Regina's feelings of helplessness, of being unable to stop the issues that destroy people, families and the environment, are only mitigated through collective action. The truth is, despite the novel's end, the characters only manage to survive because of the each other. Moraga, in defense of the family in Chicano/a culture, writes "Third World people have suffered the threat of genocide to our races since the

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<sup>108</sup> Castillo 108-109.

coming of the first European expansionists. The family, then, becomes all the more ardently protected by oppressed people, and the sanctity of this institution is infused like blood into the veins of the Chicano.”<sup>109</sup> <sup>110</sup>*The Guardians* is demonstrative of intergenerational alliances to share narratives that counter slow violence in the borderland. For this reason, El Abuelo Milton is a rather interesting character, because he helps to illustrate this idea. Following El Abuelo Milton’s introduction in the text, it is easy to think of his character as a womanizing elderly man, but he actually proves to be one of the story’s most important characters due to his age. Despite his disabilities, namely his deafness and near-blindness, his old age represents decades of critical experience and wisdom that the younger generations lack. In fact, he delivers one of the most important hints as to who, or what, watches over all of the characters in this tragic story—Los Franklins, or the mountain range north of El Paso. While reflecting on his lifetime’s experience with the border, he states, “Los Franklins stand guard over history—man’s and nature’s.”<sup>111</sup> For Abuelo Milton, by looking out from the perspective of the mountains, one can see the region spatially and ecologically in a way that outlines the connectedness of everything. At the same time, in Milton’s old age we are able to see how cultural violence has ravaged the area over a long period over time, extending farther than his own lifespan. Even so, because of Milton’s old age, he is relatively unaware of the contemporary issues that affect the border. Regina, Miguel and Gabo confront the realities of the border region in ways that are more immediate. I believe

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<sup>109</sup> Moraga 157.

<sup>110</sup> There is, of course, sexism and misogyny corrupting the cultural foundation to repress women in the community, which is a byproduct of foreign corporations, policies, and interest groups that have threatened the land and the people.

<sup>111</sup> Castillo 128.

that Castillo uses this narrative technique to represent the importance of intergenerational narratives in recording and sharing the intersections of violence in all forms. El Abuelo Milton's perspective functions to ground the younger characters in the reality that has affected the region and community for decades. The sustained violence in the borderland has not diluted his resolve to help fix the issues that plague his home, but the reality of his age has effectively sidelined his perspective. The novel, from the moment readers meet the character, are meant to understand the value of his perspective when trying to combat contemporary threats of violence. Any single perspective offered by Castillo would be insufficient to describe the complexities of this border region. The tragedy located in this area is far reaching, and countless lives have been lost as a result of the systematic exploitation of the region and its people. Therefore, it is essential that to understand how the issues of gender, immigration, sexual violence, and ecological degradation intersect, and this can only be conceived through intergenerational perspectives that span the length of issues.

## 5. Conclusion

The open wound where two nations, many cultures and many races meet, the wound where gender, sex, sexuality and ecology seemingly obfuscate, is unfortunately the place where we see the most destruction and violence. The *Feminicidios en Ciudad Juárez* are an epidemic of gender violence, which I argue is an aspect of the pervasive slow violence that erodes the borderland. Talented scientists, researchers, scholars, and activists, such as Amnesty International, Julia E. Monárrez Fragoso, Mercedes Olivera and Victoria J. Furio, Katherine Pantaleo, Basilio Verduzco Chavez, and Eugenia Shekhter, all point to the borderland as a sustained cultural, gender, and environmental crisis that shows no signs of abating without international awareness



and collective action. Literature can play a role in that solution. Rob Nixon, Priscilla Solis Ybarra and Devon Peña, in combination with John Beverley, Jefferey Alexander et al., and Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, inform us of the rhetorical and political effect of environmentally-conscious literature, specifically within the Chicano/a community located at or around the U.S./Mexico borderland. For each of them, properly considering ecological degradation requires a holistic approach that recognizes the voices of marginalized communities that are disproportionately affected. Conceiving of slow violence means that we must look to the writer-activists working to address systemic violence. The latter two ecocritics specifically cite Chicano/a literature as a site of social and environmental justice literature that can transcend the border region and bring awareness to international audiences. One of the most significant issues of slow violence is the fact that it predominately affects victimized, impoverished, and silenced communities that possess a voice to disrupt hegemonic narratives. I believe that the social and environmental justice literature examined in this project should compel people to seek out signs of slow violence.

When combined, we are able to construct, or simply witness, as is the case here, a intergenerational narrative of slow violence based at the borderland. This is an extended narrative that we can trace from Jovita González and Eve Raleigh's *Caballero: A Historical Novel*, where we see sexual violence motivated by the border war that culminated in the Chicano/a culture, identity and community. Using the contemporary theories of queer Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, we can ecocritically read *Caballero* as a story of waning Spanish-Mexican patriarchy and an emerging American patriarchal system, which has environmental implications. Anzaldúa and Moraga profess an environmentally-conscious

perspective that has evolved across generations within the Chicano/a community and culture, and the first literary signs of this narrative begin in *Caballero*. Through their analysis we are able to read González and Raleigh's destabilization of gender identity as it relates to the environment. Tracing this intergenerational narrative from González and Raleigh, through Anzaldúa and Moraga, brings us to our contemporary border crisis where we see sexual violence of women in the borderland; we see the culmination of decades of harmful patriarchal systems of female repression in the grotesque murdering of women in the border region. Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* fictionalizes the patterns of sexual violence and environmental degradation that have plagued the borderland. Most importantly, the borderland depicted by Gaspar de Alba is unequivocally worse than the threat of sexual violence illustrated in *Caballero*, which imposes a renewed sense of urgency regarding the slow violence that cripples the region. We see the embodiment and performance of a newly formed mestiza/Chicana/feminist/queer identity that is able to conceive of the intersection of nationality, gender, race, sex, sexuality and nature. This is an identity that we typically do not see in regards to this border crisis of sexual violence. Another unique feature of Gaspar de Alba's text is how personal identity is empowered through collective action. This project traces an international narrative, which fittingly concludes with Ana Castillo's *The Guardians*. The novel showcases the power of generations voices and perspectives who bear witness to the pervasive problems affecting the borderland for decades. Through three distinct generations of Chicanos and Chicanas living in the borderland, Castillo explores the perilous border while scrutinizing the toxic environmental and cultural factors that precipitate widespread slow violence. Together, these six writers and activists (Gonzalez, Raleigh, Anzaldúa, Moraga, Gaspar de Alba, and Castillo) imaginatively

record the issues of the borderland that disproportionately plague women; moreover, their work can be linked to illustrate a true intergenerational narrative. The borderland, therefore, is very much a site of writer-activism, and there are many untouched cultural productions that will continue to complicate the wound. Connecting these texts, accompanied by research of sexual and environmental violence, traces an intergenerational history of politically-oriented fiction concerned with the violence eroding both the human and non-human, which should compel individuals, communities, journalists, critics, artists, writers, politicians, etc. to explore the pervasive confluence of racial, gender, and ecological crises. The victims need eloquent voices to speak for their suffering, because without such talented group of writers, artists, theorists, researchers, and scholars, no one will hear their cries spilling out of the borderland.

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